

## KEY FINDINGS

**A. No one entity can achieve the State's goals.** No one agency or level of government (or even government by itself) is able to achieve the goals of the Act alone. They are far reaching in scope and provide direction to the planning and regulatory actions of all state and municipal agencies affecting natural resource management, land use, and development. The State Planning Office's statutory role is to coordinate and facilitate these groups of diverse interests and resources. The Office administers the Community Planning & Investment Program and is the lead agency charged with implementing Maine's Smart Growth Initiative. The Office has found valuable partners in the public and nonprofit and even private sectors. Indeed recognizing the role that developers, homebuilders, and other private businesses have in influencing patterns of development, the State's smart growth strategies rely on the power of the marketplace for achieving its desired results. Whether exploring interconnections and unintended consequences of policy and investment decisions or in simply furnishing one good galvanizing idea, all partners need to be actively involved in Maine's smart growth efforts.

**B. Sprawl is not linear.** Addressing sprawl and encouraging more fiscally-efficient and environmentally-responsible community preservation is a complex and challenging effort. Over the years, leaders in the field have come to recognize that there is *no silver bullet* that will bring about smart growth. Success is far more likely to be achieved through a series of smaller, logically-coordinated efforts than by a single-purpose, simplistic strategy. This multifaceted response will require a change in the way we view the problem; from one that is linear to one that considers the entire, interconnected structure; a "systems thinking" approach. Imagine a water balloon. If one squeezes a water balloon in one place, the water does not disappear – the balloon simply bulges in another place. The same is true in land use. Consider what happens if a town designates specific rural areas where development is discouraged, then public policies (like tax policies or environmental regulations) or public investments (like an industrial park, a sewer line extension, or construction of a school) undermine that effort by encouraging development in the very area the community is trying to direct growth away from. Maine must approach this problem with coordination across disciplines and geographic and organizational boundaries, with an eye to multiple layers of impacts.

**C. We lack data to measure success.** There is a systemic lack of data and constraints on our ability to collect them. Over the past four years, SPO has worked with municipalities, regional entities, and other state agencies to revamp policies and programs but as yet is not been able to document the full impact of these decisions. The Smart Growth Coordinating Committee established livable community indicators and the Office identified outcome measures to track development and state investments. Yet, these are very broad measures and results will only emerge over a long period of time. Finding additional ways to gauge success in the interim is important to assure that the State's efforts are effective and to identify needed adjustments or changes in approach as efforts progress. If the State cannot measure the impacts of its decisions, agencies cannot respond effectively.

**D. Resources are stretched.** Over the years, reduction in financial support has limited what the Program could achieve. This is particularly true in regard to support for regional councils and other regional planning organizations, grants to communities, funding for program staff, and

research and technical assistance budgets. The State Planning Office's prominent focus on smart growth and on state investment policy over the past six years has increased the demands that are being made on the Program, taking resources from traditional tasks such as reviewing municipal plans and providing technical assistance. Delayed comprehensive plan reviews have provoked legitimate customer service complaints. The Program is finding it increasingly difficult to meet the expectations of its various partners. In addition, the other state departments and agencies that support smart growth also face resource limitations. And the State's fiscal situation will not permit new General Fund resources.

## KEY ACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are nine priority areas for action by the State Planning Office and its partners for the next four years. Each area alone represents a significant commitment of resources and staff time. In these times of diminishing resources, the State Planning Office is cognizant of the need to be strategic. It will work with the agencies and departments who help implement the State's Smart Growth Initiative to identify where the State can achieve the greatest impact for its investment.

*1. Support collaborative forums of smart growth interests.* Continue to work with public, private, and nonprofit groups to bring and keep multiple interests involved in the pursuit of smart growth principles and to continually refine strategies to achieve the goals. To this end, the State Planning Office will:

- staff and support the efforts of the Community Preservation Advisory Committee;
- staff and coordinate the Smart Growth Coordinating Committee; and
- involve groups that bring together people who represent multiple interests like GrowSmart Maine, Friends of Mid-coast Maine, and EcoEco.

*2. Evaluate Tax Reform Options.* Evaluate tax reform proposals to assess their impact on sprawl. To this end, the State Planning Office will use the following criteria to evaluate forthcoming proposals for restructuring Maine's taxation system and suggest ways to achieve desired ends.<sup>1</sup>

Does the proposal...

- relieve service centers?
- encourage investment in service centers?
- protect at-risk properties from rapidly escalating values?
- encourage investment in locally-designated growth areas?
- provide incentives for regional tax base sharing and land use management<sup>2</sup>?
- allow towns to assess land differently in growth areas and rural areas to encourage appropriate uses in those areas?

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<sup>1</sup> This may require changes to statute and/or the Maine Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> Land use management or land management includes planning, regulation, investment, and other strategies.

3. *Coordinate Planning and Investment.* Work with state, regional, and local partners to make service centers attractive and affordable places to live so they will be more likely to retain and attract residents. To this end, the State Planning Office will:

- foster integrated state agency capital and program planning that respects regional and local smart growth efforts as well as state programmatic needs;
- offer strategies for land management and capital investment that stimulate desired regional growth patterns and preserve community character; and
- encourage shared public and private planning and investment at the local level to create the quality of investment that neither sector, alone, can afford.

4. *Plan for Local Street and Infrastructure Investment.* The State Planning Office will work with the Maine Department of Transportation and other agencies to establish a framework and technical assistance for local street network planning and capital investment for infrastructure that supports livable, compact development patterns.

5. *Optimize School Construction Funds.* The State Planning Office will continue to work with the Board and Department of Education to invest state school construction funds in a way that they are an incentive for community preservation and smart growth.

The goal of these efforts is to help ensure that:

- schools in service centers are of a quality to retain and attract residents and businesses;
- before state funds are spent to provide new capacity in surrounding suburbanizing communities, the option to utilize any excess capacity in service center schools is seriously considered;<sup>3</sup> and
- new schools in service centers are sited and constructed so as to maximize the option of students walking, bicycling, or using public transportation systems to get to school.

6. *Focus Environmental Regulation.* Assure that environmental regulations do not have the unintended consequence of driving development outward. To this end, the State Planning Office will continue to work with the state's natural resource agencies to enhance the current policy framework; moving from piecemeal regulation to one that considers multiple resources simultaneously.

7. *Provide Housing Choices.* Market studies show that many people want to live in traditional, compact neighborhoods within walking distance of services and facilities. What's more, many residents cannot afford suburban, large-lot subdivisions which prevail in many towns today. To that end, the State Planning Office will:

- continue to provide tools (including incentives) that Maine communities can use to support development of livable, affordable neighborhoods; and
- undertake further market research to evaluate housing options and mechanisms that not only meet the needs and demands of homebuyers, but also meet community goals for compact, efficient growth over the long term.

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<sup>3</sup> This may require changes to statute and/or the Maine Constitution.

8. *Build Capacity to Measure Outcomes of Smart Growth Efforts.* There are some promising initiatives that should be evaluated to determine whether to pursue them further. This requires good data. To that end, the State Planning will continue to design and build systems to measure the success of smart growth efforts so that the next evaluation can be more quantitative by:

- working with partner state agencies to build data collection methods necessary to update *Indicators of Livable Communities* every two years;
- completing pilots and developing systems to track the location of new development and state capital investment;
- establishing measures to evaluate the impact of smart growth efforts on regional growth patterns; and
- continuing to work with communities to build bolder plans that contain benchmarks to gauge interim success and to monitor progress towards desired outcomes.

9. *Set Priorities.* A tremendous amount of progress has been made over the last four years, yet significant effort lies before us. Given resource limitations, it is essential that the State Planning Office carefully selects where to invest its limited resources over the next four years to assure continued progress. Over the coming months, the State Planning Office will review the recommendations contained herein with its partners to establish short, intermediate, and long-term priorities. As part of its efforts to address resource limitations, the State Planning Office will also:

- work with the Smart Growth Coordinating Committee to create a new strategic plan that sets priorities for the actions and recommendations in this report;
- identify the most strategic efforts to attain desired outcomes and consider eliminating or setting aside those efforts that are less closely tied to achieving them or can be postponed;
- explore new systems for the delivery of services;
- find partners to take on a greater role in some areas; and
- secure additional non-General Fund resources to support important efforts.

For detailed recommendations, see the GOALS ASSESSMENT section of this report.